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United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3703

March 9, 2009

COMMITTEES:

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The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I am writing to ask that U.S. Department of Agriculture meat inspectors be assigned to rural Oregon as a way of reducing the cost of shipping cattle long distances for inspection and increasing food safety. Currently, most cattle are raised in eastern and southern Oregon, while USDA inspectors are located in western Oregon or in other states. This situation has created an additional hardship on Oregon cattlemen at a time when the economy is making cattle ranching difficult enough. The Oregon Cattlemen's Association, Oregon Rural Action and individual ranchers have told me that local inspection could help stabilize their business and expand markets, allowing them to sell local meats to schools, farmers' markets and grocers.

For small and mid-sized Oregon producers, the lack of regional USDA inspection services requires shipping live cattle by truck hundreds of miles across the state or across state lines to obtain USDA inspection and certification. One is Carman Ranches near Joseph, Oregon, which is forced to transport cattle three hours one-way to get USDA inspection for their grass-fed beef. The owners of Carman Ranches estimate that the transportation and staff time adds 30 percent to their overall production and sales costs.

This experience is not unusual. In a producer study conducted by Oregon State University's Food Innovation Center, 32 percent of respondents reported traveling more than 150 miles one-way. It was this study that noted the irony of having beef cattle raised in one part of the state and most USDA inspectors are in another.

There is no better time to deal with the lack of USDA inspectors in Oregon cattle country. Eastern Oregon cattle ranchers have indicated to me their willingness to contribute to the costs of local or regional inspections. And, as you have indicated publicly, the costs in terms of public health risks and industry risks are just too high when we fail to provide appropriate and adequate inspections. Locating inspectors in cattle country would address this problem.

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Rural Oregon economies are already suffering. December 2008 unemployment rates in the eastern Oregon counties ranged from around 10 percent in Baker County to nearly 16 percent in Grant County. By addressing this food safety issue, there is an opportunity to stabilize traditional natural resource economies and create economic opportunity in the rural areas of my state by allowing ranchers and food processors to grow and thrive.

Given the current concerns relating to food safety and the nation's food supply, I ask that you give this request immediate consideration. If you have additional questions or concerns, please contact my Washington, D.C. office at 202-224-5244, to discuss how I can work with you to support Oregon producers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ron Wyden", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

RON WYDEN
United States Senator